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DIARY OF MRS. WILLIAM THORNTON. CAP-  
TURE OF WASHINGTON BY THE  
BRITISH.

PREFATORY NOTE.

The subjoined account of the invasion of the city by the British on August 24, 1814, and of the scenes and incidents following it, forms a part of the journal of Mrs. William Thornton extending from 1800 to 1863 and now in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress. While this record, which with the exception of the first year is mainly an expense account, was kept in small books, the description of the capture of Washington is on sheets of paper. As it supplies a gap in the journal, it may be concluded that the Thorntons in common with a large number of the citizens of Washington, sent their papers and valuables out of the city when the situation became threatening. Owing to the circumstances as stated in the journal, Mrs. Thornton did not follow her property, which was probably sent to their farm at Bethesda, Md. In consequence she was unable to continue the record in her journal and instead used sheets of paper.

At this time, however, as was the case with the journalizing of the first year, she wrote more in detail. After this period the record again becomes meager.

This account of an eye witness, who put down each day what she saw and heard, is the only one of the kind that has been preserved. It begins with the first actual movement of troops in defense of the city after the government had learned that the British fleet with veterans from the Napoleonic war in Europe had en-

tered the Patuxent. Two days after sending out this force of some 2,200 men, the British troops, numbering some four thousand, landed from the ships at Benedict, some thirty-five miles southeast of the city, and began the march which ended four days later, on August 24, in the battle of Bladensburg.

On the 18th of August, as Mrs. Thornton states, the troops from the city, mostly militia companies from Washington and Georgetown, went into camp at Wood-yard, twelve miles to the east and south of the city. Falling back in the face of the steady advance of the enemy, four days later, on August 22, the American camp was at Old Fields, five miles nearer the city. On the evening of the following day as they were threatened by skirmish parties from the main body, then making its way to Bladensburg by the Marlboro Road, the Americans retired across the Eastern Branch bridge into the city where they went into camp.

The next day a junction was made with the main army at Bladensburg where the battle was fought.

W. B. BRYAN.

March 4, 1916.

DIARY.

*Thursday 18*—our troops marched over the Eastern Branch:

*Friday 19*

*Saturday 20*

*Sunday 21*<sup>1</sup>

*Monday 22*<sup>2</sup>. Mrs. Cutts<sup>1</sup> & Forrest went away. The president went to the camp this evening with Mr. Armstrong<sup>2</sup> etc.

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Richard Cutts, sister of the wife of President Madison. Her husband was the superintendent of military supplies. The Cuttses were living in a house on the site of 1333-35 F St. northwest, where the Madisons had lived during the latter portion of Mr. Madison's service as secretary of state. The Thorntons lived in the next house, now the site of 1331 F St.

<sup>2</sup> John Armstrong, secretary of war, who resigned shortly after the invasion of the city in consequence of the criticism of his war administration.

*Tuesday 23<sup>d</sup>*—Dr. T. went to day with Mr. Cutts & Mr. R<sup>d</sup>. Forrest intending to go to the Camp near the Wood Yard but met the president and suite and Dr. T. & Mr. C. went with them to dine at Mr. Williams near Bladensburg—Dr. T. rode, reconnoitering with Col. Monroe Mr Chas. Carroll Rush & Ringgold<sup>s</sup> and returned at midnight—Mr. and Mrs Cutting slept here—Had the horses harnessed ready to go off as we had several acc<sup>ts</sup>. that the enemy were near Bladensburg.—Our troops all came over the bridge again. This as since proved was a great error in Winder & all engaged, for if they had had correct information they wou'd have known they were not marching towards the bridge, & instead of crossing into the city that night, (which gave the troops an opportunity of dispersing, particularly those who had families or homes in the City they ought to have sent a small party to destroy the end only of the bridge of the further side & then got their army into proper order in the neighborhood of Bladensburg by which way *only* they cou'd enter the City—Instead of this the troops were marched off their legs—were even late in the day in various parts of the City & were hastily gathered together to meet a regular force who tho' likewise fatigued by a long & forced march, had a regular plan, had discipline & a desperate attempt to make to succeed in a plan both bold & hazardous & it is the general opinion that if the force we had tho' inexperienced had been judiciously arranged the enemy might have been cut off or taken— It was not even attempted to rally them but they were ordered to retreat first to the capitol then over the little falls bridge & finally it was changed to Montgomery Court House a distance of at least 22 miles— & the baggage waggons sent a different route over the potomac Bridge.

One of the prisoners said he had been in 38 engagements & had never been treated with indignity & insult as he was in Bladensburg.—

*Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup>*: No accounts at ten this morning of the course of the Enemy Almost all our acquaintance gone out

<sup>s</sup> James Monroe, secretary of state, Charles Carroll, of Bellevue, Georgetown, a brother of Daniel Carroll, of Duddington, Richard Rush, the attorney general, and Tench Ringgold, a resident of the city and the owner of a rope walk in the vicinity of Greenleaf Point.

of town. nearly All the moveable property taken away—offices shut up & all business at a stand.—

We heard rumours that the armies had engaged, & expected to hear the cannon &c but heard nothing—at last saw a man riding as hard as possible toward the president's house—we went up soon after & found that Mrs M— was gone—We sat down to dinner but I cou'd eat nothing and we dilly dally'd till we saw our retreating army come up the avenue—we then hastened away, and were escorted out of town by our Defeated troops, Gen'l Washington's picture and a cart load of goods from the president's House in Company—(it was supposed that Mr. Custis got some of the soldiers' to take out this picture). When we got to the upper part of GeorgeT<sup>n</sup>.—we met Mr. Richards who advised us not to proceed up the road, as it was crowded with troops &c & that there was a rumour that the British were to head them that way & give them Battle Dr. T. having gone round by Mr. peter's we did not know what step to take but decided to go to Mr. peter's and wait till we cou'd send for him—I sent off John on one of the carriage horses & he did not overtake him till he got to Tenny Town he supposing we were before him<sup>4</sup>—We staid all night at Mrs peter's<sup>5</sup> (Mrs. Cutting with us) and there witnessed the conflagration of our poor undefended & devoted city

*Thursday 25<sup>th</sup>.*—Dr. T. went to the City & by his exertions, saved the patent office from destruction—They were on the point of setting it on fire & he represented to the officer (Col. Jones) that it was the Museum of the Arts & that it wou'd be a loss to all the world—The war office was not burnt till after

<sup>4</sup> Tenleytown, as it is now written, was a hamlet in the District on the road from Georgetown to Rockville or Montgomery Court House, as it is spoken of by Mrs. Thornton. The distance from the city was about four miles. At Tenleytown the River Road begins and it was on that road a little north of Tenleytown that the American troops made their first night encampment after leaving the city.

<sup>5</sup> It is presumed that Mrs. Thomas Peter is referred to. She was the granddaughter of Mrs. Washington and lived at Tudor Place, 31st and Q Sts.

breakfast today—The rope walks were burnt.<sup>6</sup> We had a dreadful storm & gust but fortunately accompanied with rain—the weather during all the fires fortunately was very calm, but it appears almost miraculous that the whole place was not consumed.—But great pains was taken by the English not to injure private property—It is feared that very little property had been saved out of the president's House—Dr. T.—returned to dinner—& went out at ½ after 4 for our farm.—

*Friday 26*—Dr. T. went to town—we went over to Mr Bradley's to see Mr Cutts we there heard from Mr. Johnson that the Enemy had left the City—Dr. T. did not return till late in the Evng he had been exerting himself to prevent the property left in the ruins of the Navy Yard, Capitol—P. H. and Executive office from being pillaged & getting guards of the English & Citizens appointed to patrol & sending Carts for our wounded men who were still on the Common.—He brought us the disagreeable account that the English are likely to return.—They are gone it is supposed to Baltimore they have left behind some wounded men—whom Dr. J. Ewell had humanely attended, & Dr. T. directed the Expenses of Provisions &c to be charged to him<sup>7</sup>—Never was there such a complete discomfiture of an army—the poor Creatures were marched to death on a dreadfully hot day before the Engage-

<sup>6</sup> The patent office was in the building at the northeast corner of 8th and E Sts. northwest, where was also the post office department and the city post office. Originally built for hotel purposes it was purchased by the government in 1810.

The war office occupied the executive building to the west of the White House and on a line with the south front. The treasury building had a corresponding position on the east side of the White House. These three were the only publicly owned executive buildings in the city.

The rope walks, two in number, were in the southern section between the navy yard and the arsenal.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. James Ewell was a practicing physician whose house at the northeast corner of 1st and A Sts. northeast, overlooking the grounds of the capitol, was occupied by Gen. Ross and Admiral Cockburn during the stay of the British in the city. He was a brother-in-law of the eccentric Virginia minister, Mason L. Weems, and a brother of Dr. Thomas Ewell who married a daughter of Benjamin Stoddert and who was a resident of the city.

ment began & then retreated 12 or 13 miles without halting—they were obliged to lay down in the fence corners & any where on the road they were so completely exhausted with hunger & fatigue—They went to Montg<sup>r</sup> C<sup>t</sup> House as soon as they cou'd.

*Saturday 27<sup>th</sup>:* Rain.—It cleared up about noon & we prepared to come to town, as Dr. T. said he must be in town every day—we came in & brought our dinner with us—Mr. Cutts & family came in & many other persons—We were soon alarmed with a heavy cannonading supposed to be at the Fort Warburton and at about 8 o'clock there was a most dreadful explosion<sup>s</sup>—The firing recommenced in the night.—But we slept pretty well notwithstanding—The president is at Mr Rush's.—much damage is done also by the Storm, & it seems as if the Elements were conspiring to make the scene & times truly awful. Mr. Richecour called to see us—Mrs Cutting went home.—

*Sunday 28<sup>th</sup>:* High wind & very warm—A general alarm in the city as it is expected the fleet will come up, & the sailors be let loose to plunder & destroy Dr. T. set out to go to Bladensburg but returned—The president Monroe & Rush stopped at Mr Cutt's door—I lent Mr. M— a spy glass.—The people are violently irritated at the thought of our attempting to make any more futile resistance.—Our stupid mayor (Blake) now tagging after the president—he ran away in the hour of danger.<sup>s</sup>—Dr. T. followed the president & party to tell them what the people said—they did not appear pleased at it said they wou'd hear of no deputation & that the people must all arm—Dr. T. came home & dis-

<sup>s</sup> Fort Washington, or as it was popularly known at that period, Fort Warburton, the only fortified place on the Potomac, was twelve miles south of the city. On the approach of the enemy's vessels, the garrison under command of Capt. S. T. Dyson, of the artillery corps of the army, without firing a shot, blew up the fortifications and abandoned them.

<sup>s</sup> The mayor of the city was Dr. James H. Blake. A heated newspaper discussion ensued between the mayor and Dr. Thornton over the latter's charges that the head of the city government had been remiss in his civic duty during the trying period of the invasion.

tressed us more than ever by taking his sword & going out to call the people & to join them—Mrs Thomson called much agitated at the state of things—Dr. T returned—and we were quieted—it is supposed they will not come up here at all—It sounded very bold to say they wou'd not surrender—after we were conquered & the public property laid in ruins—Mr. Richecour called Mrs. M. came to Mrs Cutts' in a (illegible) carriage Mr. Madison Monroe &c dined there.—Mr. Forrest dined here—sent dinner over to Cap<sup>t</sup>. David Crawford Dr. T. went to Bladensburg to visit a Co<sup>l</sup>. Thornton who is wounded there.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Smith & family came in and staid to tea we stepped in to see Mrs. Madison; she was very violent against the English—& wished we had 10,000 such men as were passing (a few troopers) to sink our Enemy to the bottomless pit. X

X The Secy of State said they were all damn'd Rascals from highest to lowest.—(Mr Monroe)

She had better attribute the loss of her palace to the right cause viz want of proper defence in time.—Mr. Fairfax came—They are going to take flour and tobacco from Alex<sup>a</sup>.—& it is not thought they will come up here.—Dr. T. came home late & then rode to GeorgeT<sup>n</sup>. to see Mr Crawford about taking a stage to Bladensburg for Mr. Barton, Mr Barclay's Secy who is ordered off by the great Gen<sup>l</sup>. Mason—

*Monday 29<sup>th</sup>.* We spent a quiet night. Alarms to-day of the Vessels coming up many persons moving away again that had come in.—We rode to Mrs. Cuttings & the Capitol Hill to the Bank but it was shut up.<sup>11</sup>—Account of the Capitulation of Alexandria which if correct is truly humiliating.—X

X Mrs M. said she supposed they wou'd not be up tonight, as the slaves of Alex<sup>a</sup>. were too busy carrying burdens for them—& that they ought to have suffered their town to be burnt rather than submit to such terms.—

But they had no defence

<sup>10</sup> Col. William Thornton, an English officer and a namesake of Dr. Thornton.

<sup>11</sup> The Bank of Washington, the first in the city, began business in 1809 with a capital of \$200,000. At this time it was located on the east side of New Jersey Ave. between B and C Sts. southeast.



*Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup>.* We had another quiet night & hope the Enemy will not pay us a second Visit—Dr. T. & Mr Fairfax gone to see Mr Tayloe who is unwell at O Neills.—Mr Claggett came & wished Dr. T. to assist him in trying to take some steps to release Dr. Beanes of Marlbro'—who is taken prisoner—Dr. T. went to see Gen<sup>l</sup>. Mason & Co<sup>l</sup>. Monroe—They promised to attend to it—Mr. Forrest also went to Mason & he was promised a flag of truce to go tomorrow morning.—Mrs F. came to town & returned after dinner. The president & Lady being next door *we* were guarded at night—by eleven horsemen of Co<sup>l</sup>. Graham's troop. Mr Robinson one of the men—they laid on straw near the house.

*Wednesday 31.*—Another quiet night—Dr. T. rode to the Navy Y<sup>d</sup>—Our waggon came down with Oats &c—They are beginning to repair the Roof of the patent & post office injured much by the storm. Mama & I rode to Moses Young's to get a Book left by Mr. Yobert for us, & found him there himself. then to Mr peter's—great military preparations making now. Rogers has arrived with 6 or 700 sailors.—Gen<sup>l</sup>. Armstrong is gone, but it is known whether he is dismissed or not—It is supposed not—The public voice is against him, tho' there does not appear to be good reason to throw all the blame on him.—Co<sup>l</sup>. Monroe is now Sec<sup>y</sup> of State & War & Commander in chief of the District We rode to GeorgT<sup>n</sup>. & saw many of the troops going off—to the White house in Virginia It is reported that Ad<sup>l</sup>. Cockburn has sent an Express to the fleet at Alex<sup>a</sup>—to quit as he had done all the harm he intended in our district.—

*Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> of Sept<sup>r</sup>.*—The Vessels still laying opposite to Alex<sup>a</sup>.—taking in plunder The weather hot and calm—Rode to the Navy Y<sup>d</sup>— & Eastern Branch Bridge, which as it has proved was burnt very unnecessarily as well as part of our large potomac Bridge.—Mrs Cutting went with us.—

*Friday 2<sup>d</sup>.*—Warm—Nothing new—Rogers perry & porter laying their heads together to destroy the Vessels at Alex<sup>a</sup>.—Firing heard & some Vessels seen burning this Eveng.—Col. Mercer called here.—Went in to Mr. Cutts' to see the president did not return here as I expected.—

*Saturday 3<sup>d</sup>.* Ther: 87—Dr. T. went to Mr Threlkeld's.—Calm generally a small gust of wind & rain about noon—Set out to ride to the point—but returned as we thought it too late—drank tea at Mrs Forrest's.—Fulton is here also it is said.—Mrs. F. is wound up to the proper pitch for the times by going to Marlbro' where the English in their retreat committed some Excesses—but she was particularly roused by seeing her Brother's home look like a barracks as it was—& his being pillaged of his cloath's horses &c.—Dr Beans taken a prisoner, in consequence of some *busy informant* following the English & telling them that Dr B— was engaged in taking up some straggling soldiers this they considered a breach of his promise of *neutrality*, they sent back some men who carried him off in the night, hardly permitting him to put on his cloaths—two or three other gentlemen who were taken at same time were liberated, as they had made *no promises* & were not in the town when the first entered it.—A Flag is sent by Mr Skinner form Annapolis—Mr. F. Key<sup>12</sup> accompanies him, also a brother of Mr Graham's.—The president has a nightly guard of 50 militia men.—Dr. T. rec<sup>d</sup>. a letter from the Secy of State desiring him to have the models moved to make room for Congress—

Sunday 4<sup>t</sup>, very warm Ther: 89—Dr. T— rode to George T<sup>n</sup> to see Dr. Mease who called here yesterday Eveng—After Dinner he went to Bladensburg to visit Co<sup>l</sup> Thornton.—We went to Mrs Elzey's Thompson's & Davidson's.—

*Monday 5<sup>th</sup>:* cool—a wind rose in the night it is cool & cloudy.—Dr Mease called—Dr. T. went with him to the office.—Sent & borrowed a bed-pan (from Mr Nichols George T<sup>n</sup>) & sent it by Joe to Co<sup>l</sup>. Thornton.—Dr. T. & Dr. Mease went in our carriage to Bladensburg.—A terrible cannonading from about 12 oclock till after SunSet, with very little interruption.—Drizzling rain—The poor Guards have to stay out in it—Is it customary for guards to lay out on straw?—even Dogs have kennels.—

*Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup>.* Rain—The fleet silenced our Batteries & got

<sup>12</sup> Francis Scott Key, who while on this errand saw the battle of North Point and was inspired to write the Star Spangled Banner.

thro'—losses not known yet. Dr T went up to Mr Threlkeld's—staid late in the Evening.—

*Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup>.* Dr. T published in the Nat<sup>l</sup>. Intelligencer a statement of his conduct while the Enemy were in the City. Dr T. & Dr Mease went over to Mr. Custis's.—Nothing new to day—many lives lost in the vain attempt to take the Alex<sup>a</sup>. fleet.—many poor fellows dying of sickness in consequence of fatigue and laying out of nights without tents—Not mercenary troops who made a trade of fighting but valuable & respectable citizens many promising young men of genteel families who never having been accustomed to any fatigue sink under the unprec[ed]ented hardships they have had to endure.—

We rode to George T<sup>n</sup>. came back to tea.

*Thursday 8<sup>th</sup>:* Warm.—Dr Maese came after breakfast.—I had a long conversation with Mrs Cutts & Madison today They have listened to many misrepresentations & falsehoods concerning Dr T—& of course are not pleased with him—Mr Fairfax came to dinner.—We went to see the effect of the explosion of the well that had Gun powder put in it by our people to hide it as supposed.<sup>13</sup>—We burnt the buildings at the point to prevent the Enemy getting the Arms—which certainly might have been secured & they might have given the buildings a chance of being preserved.—The Enemy spiked a few of the cannon but left them generally standing on their carriages as they found them—they lost a great many men by this accidental explosion which has made a monstrous cavity at least — feet diam<sup>r</sup>.—The magazine of powder blew up by this explosion but all the powder was not destroyed.—It is generally thought that the Navy Y<sup>d</sup> & the point both might easily have been defended, if preparation had been made in time.—But they did not think they wou'd come.—

*Friday 9<sup>th</sup>*—Dr T—went on his Mare to Dr. Duvalls—we went to the farm

*Saturday 10<sup>th</sup>:* Returned in the afternoon Dr T—returned

<sup>13</sup> This was at the arsenal of Greenleaf Point<sup>s</sup>, now the site of the War College.

about an hour before us—Nothing new, we now wait the approaching Session of Congress with some anxiety.<sup>14</sup>—

<sup>14</sup>Congress was called in special session by the president and met September 19, 1814, occupying the building at the northwest corner of 8th and E Sts. northwest, the only public structure the enemy had spared. This was done, as Mrs. Thornton states, on the plea of her husband, who as superintendent of the patent office interposed to save the record of the inventive genius of the Nation. According to the current talk, and as it proved expressing the sentiment of a number of the members, Congress would not remain in the city, hence the anxiety on the part of citizens referred to by Mrs. Thornton.